

# How to evaluate sermons

Joel R. Beeke



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*Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire*

(1 Corinthians 3:5-15).

## How to evaluate sermons

In the 2010 Winter Olympics, speed-skater Sven Kramer was poised to win a second gold medal. He pressed forward in the last eight of twenty-five laps in the gruelling 10,000 metre race. He had a six-second lead on the men behind him, and victory seemed sure. But then Kramer's coach shouted: 'Inner lane!' Kramer hesitated, then changed lanes, finishing the race for what he believed was a sure win.

His race earned him nothing, as Olympic officials ruled that Kramer's cross into the wrong lane disqualified him from the race. The loss was far worse for his coach. 'This is the worst moment of my career,' he said.<sup>1</sup> What a tragedy for those highly skilled men after years of training!

It is far worse for a servant of the Lord to cross the boundaries of his calling, thereby losing some of the heavenly reward that might have been his. The Bible reminds us that an athlete does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules (2 Timothy 2:5). This tragedy is not limited to scandalous falls and apostasies that bring open shame to ministers of the gospel. It is also evident in the quiet lane changes by which godly preachers of the Word operate outside

their Lord's will. These errors do not disqualify a man's pastoral ministry, but they do compromise his calling and will ultimately cost him some reward.

As preachers, we are like spiritual athletes who need to keep growing and developing our skills. We also function as spiritual coaches to Christ's church. Our sermons seriously affect those under our care; our responsibility is great. It is especially frightening for a preacher to press forward with energy and satisfaction, realizing how he erred only after reaching the finish line.

We must regularly evaluate our preaching to know if we are growing as preachers. Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) said to his ministerial students, 'I give you the motto, "Go forward." Go forward in personal attainments, forward in gifts and in grace, forward in fitness for the work, and forward in conformity to the image of Jesus.' He went on to say, 'If there be any brother here who thinks he can preach as well as he should, I would advise him to leave off altogether.'<sup>2</sup>

How do you evaluate yourself as a preacher? A preacher's view of his own messages can be an emotional roller-coaster ride driven by his moods and the responses of the congregation. We dare not evaluate ourselves by measurable results such as increased attendance or new members joining the church, for people often flock to false teachers like flies to manure. Nor can we gauge our effectiveness by a brother who shoots out of a worship service like a bullet out of a rifle, or a woman who gets misty-eyed and emotional in shaking our hand after

a sermon. For all we know, the brother was suddenly taken ill, and the sister recently received bad news about a distant relative. Neither response necessarily has anything to do with our preaching. My father was once so moved by a child's intense listening that he questioned her about what she found so important. She responded: 'I was trying to figure out if you had shaved this morning.'

This does not mean we should plough forward without reflection, however. We need standards for self-evaluation. Our habitual standard should be *to evaluate our preaching as a servant anticipating our Master's evaluation*. In 1 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul addresses the issue of division within the church, specifically in people's preference for one teacher over another, such as Paul or Apollos or Peter (1 Corinthians 1:10–12). Chapter 3 opens with Paul accusing the Corinthians of petty, childish bickering. He says in 1 Corinthians 3:4: 'For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?' This sets the stage for 1 Corinthians 3:5–15, in which Paul tells the church how to evaluate teachers of the Word. The text has huge implications for how pastors and Bible teachers should view their own ministry. In telling us that we must each evaluate our preaching as a servant anticipating his master's evaluation, this text suggests five questions to ask ourselves about our preaching. Each question provides both a motivation and a method for evaluating our sermons.